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### Special issue

**Citation for published version:**

Boeren, E & James, N 2017, 'Special issue: Advancing theory and research in widening participation', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 117-119.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1318540>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/0158037X.2017.1318540](https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1318540)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Studies in Continuing Education

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Studies in Continuing Education on 24 Apr 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1318540>.

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## Special Issue: Advancing Theory and Research in Widening Participation

Guest editors: Ellen Boeren & Nalita James

Issues of access, social exclusion and widening participation dominate educational policy agendas and are a shared global challenge. Widening participation is defined as ‘...increasing the participation of under-represented groups by working to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so whatever their background and whenever they need it.’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014, p.6). In a landscape of mass higher education, participation in higher education and adult lifelong learning activities can be a life-changing experience that opens up new opportunities, yet access remains unequal with underrepresented groups in post-compulsory education, including those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those living in the most deprived areas and people from minority ethnic groups.

The impact of this inequality has put pressure on governments worldwide to find ways increase the participation of these groups in the education system, particularly through educational strategies in widening participation and lifelong learning. To ensure that those from groups under-represented can progress to university, and that individual needs are being met to enable them to succeed, much focus, has been on the participation of 18 years old pupils coming from schools with low progression rates, often in deprived areas. Widening participation is therefore often understood in the context of higher education first generation students without strongly focussing on the needs of adults and mature students who want to continue their education, despite the recognised need for everyone to maintain and increase their skills across the lifespan. For example, a recent book about widening participation in higher education, drawing upon stories from scholars all across the world only mentions ‘mature’ students seven times, despite being a book of more than 250 pages (Shah, Bennett and Southgate, 2015).

Research into widening participation has demonstrated the negative impact of a selective post compulsory education system on educational disadvantage and differential participation.

In this Special Issue, we focus on how we can move the field of widening participation forward, paying specific attention to the theories and methods we can use to better understand and tackle the problem of underrepresented groups in post-compulsory education, and how individuals and institutions can be supported. We argue that in order to make sense of these issues, and in applying widening participation and lifelong learning to the contemporary challenges of forging more equal access, it is important to engage in both the findings of widening participation research *and* the theoretical foundations which underpin them to open up alternative perspectives on the widening participation agenda and emerging research and policy. This Special Issue addresses this issue by focussing on theory and research. The first two articles provide a critical discussion on the use of two core authors often used in widening participation research: Sen and Bourdieu. Campbell and McKendrick discuss insights from Sen’s capability approach to generate insights on how to tackle underrepresentation among young people from deprived areas based on a mixed methods comparative case study of two Scottish schools. Their paper challenges the ‘poverty of aspirations thesis’ and makes a good argument for the need to explore widening participation beyond the level of raising aspirations. The paper from Webb and her colleagues is centred around ‘thinking with and beyond Bourdieu’, adopting a critical lens on one of the core authors used in this type of educational research. This paper offers insight in the relevance of Bourdieu’s work, as well as offering

suggestions for extending his work with the aim to achieve more nuanced understandings of the widening participation problem across the world. Boeren's paper is also theoretical in nature, providing insight into the need for individuals, educational institutions and country-level policies to cooperate successfully in order to make participation for underrepresented groups work. This theoretical contribution has been summarised in a Comprehensive Lifelong Learning Participation Model for use in future research. More specifically at the level of educational institutions and the country-level, in their paper Lavrijsen and Nicaise, based on analyses of the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), expand on the need to understand widening participation beyond the individual level and to acknowledge country differences based on the configuration of the compulsory education system. It is, for example, clear that in countries where pupils are sorted into different tracks at a younger age, they tend on average to score lower on learning attitudes. An example of an institutional initiative to attract more underrepresented groups is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), discussed by Cooper and colleagues in the South African context. They draw on a social realist perspective to focus on tensions between striving towards more inclusive practices and the challenges that come with its' implementation,.

Advancing theory and further deepening of relevant aspects such as RPL or the design of education systems is vital, but it is also important to critically evaluate the data that currently are being produced and used in relation to widening participation. This Special Issue is completed by a paper by Holland and others in the context of the UK, which provides a critical analysis of the challenges of identifying, obtaining and using data on widening participation for purposes of improving student access, progression and achievement. The need for high quality data is indeed important to make evidence-based policy decisions in the future and they make a number of suggestions to improve data.

## References

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## **Editors' biographies**

Dr Ellen Boeren is lecturer at the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh (UK). She is leading the Edinburgh team within the European funded Horizon 2020 project ENLIVEN 'Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe' and worked with the OECD as part of the Thomas J. Alexander fellowship scheme. In 2016, her book 'Lifelong learning participation in a changing policy context: an interdisciplinary theory' was published by Palgrave-MacMillan. She is Programme Director of Edinburgh's MSc in Educational Research and teaches Comparative Analysis in Education. She is Chair of the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA).

Dr Nalita James is Associate Professor in Education, University of Leicester. Her research interests include: access to higher education, adult education, lifelong learning, educational transitions, and educational policy. Together with Hugh Busher she has conducted research on access to higher education (funded by the British Academy and Aim Awards 2011-2013) and is published widely in this area. She is co-author (with Hugh Busher) of *Improving Opportunities to Engage in Learning: A study of the Access to Higher Education Diploma* (Routledge, 2018).